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AUL VERLAINE: A STUDY OF
THE QUALITY OF HIS GENIUS
AND OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF
HIS VERSE.

There is a story current that Verlaine spends the half of every year in an asylum for inebriates, the other half in getting in condition to return. It is while there that he writes his poetry, for when at large he finds no time. Verlaine, therefore, leaves his lyre in the asylum along with the asylum impedimenta, medicine chests and the like, reasonably certain all the while that the time for physic and singing will come again.

This story may not be true, although it comes with the authority of a French critic, who may, perhaps, have invented it. At present, at any rate, I fear it cannot be relied upon, owing to Verlaine's astounding change of heart. True or not true, however, it seems to me characteristic of certain phases of his genius; especially of a kind of inconsequence which strikes me as being alcoholic.

Verlaine, probably, would deny that he owes this inconsequence—this perversity—to so material a source as alcohol. To himself, I take it, he seems a Saturnian—that is, one born under the influence of the planet Saturn. Such people, he says, for he has written a poem on the subject, are the very sport of destiny, the slaves of whim, having but little control over their passions, and still less over their emotions. The lives of such people, he thinks, may have much of interest, but they can have but little of contentment. And since they are thus made, one may conclude they are apt to go off on a tangent at any moment; having begun to talk of oysters they are rather more likely than not to branch off on brown sugar. Verlaine acknowledges that "*c'est un point encore mal éclairci*," but seems to offer it as an apology for himself; for being, it may be, almost certainly for doing. To refer Verlaine's characteristics to astrology is more interesting than to refer them to alcohol; perhaps the alcohol is itself owing to planetary influence. If a man believes in astrology, if, for him, it exists as a science, we may well consider its effects on his life. We can hardly say, then, whether Verlaine is Alcoholic or Saturnian; he at least is not a Saturnian of the golden age.

He is a grotesque, taking himself seriously, I think, in so far, at least, as he suffers, says that he suffers, and makes the reader feel the suffering; if he had any sense of humour, he

could scarcely take himself seriously at all. But, though in himself not humourous, he has a sense, an appreciation of incongruous effects—as of the juxtaposition of mutually inimical colours—which produces the effects aimed at by the humourist. If you do not feel with him, you must smile at him; and the more you smile at him, perhaps, the better you like him.

Yet it would seem that he must have a sense of humour since he laughs at others so agreeably. He cannot take all people so seriously as he seems to take himself—and it is quite possible, though I do not think it probable, that he intends himself only as a huge and compact joke. One thing which he cannot take seriously, being, as he is, a Frenchman, is the idea of innocence considered in relation to women; therefore he writes:

*“ Nous sommes des Ingénues
Aux bandeaux plats, à l’œil bleu,
Qui vivons presque inconnues.
Dans les romans qu’on lit peu.”*

This is, evidently, an *ingénue* of the English type, and as such a legitimate subject for French mockery; it shows, then, that in some respects, at least, he is normal—or more accurately, perhaps, normally French.

M. Bourget has a theory which might help to account for Verlaine. According to Bourget, every book has a certain effect on the life of the succeeding generation. To study the genesis of Verlaine, therefore, we have only to go back to the past generation of poets, and to select those for whom he shows the most affinity—who seem most likely to have been his mental and (im)moral progenitors. There is one French poet, I think, who can claim a pre-eminent influence in forming Paul Verlaine; that poet is Charles Baudelaire. Possibly Baudelaire would not care to claim so dangerous an honour; even he might disapprove of so strange a pupil, of this mental changeling; for Verlaine, so far as he is Baudelaire, is Baudelaire gone wrong. Considering Baudelaire as a deep, if not pure, well, we may perhaps regard Verlaine as the well's water spread out into a shallow pool. The pool covers a great deal more ground than the well did, and colours all it touches with its peculiar absinthine hue; but it does not cover its ground nearly so completely as did the well. Baudelaire was a consummate artist; Verlaine is an artist in his way, but in a very different way. Baudelaire produced his effects by slow, conscientious elaboration; Verlaine produces

his by intuitive splashing and the grace of God—the grace of his peculiar gods which are like the devils of most men. Baudelaire was a diseased romanticist; Verlaine is a bizarre impressionist. He ventures extraordinarily audacious rhymes—rhymes to make “Saint Boileau” turn in his grave; and he does it, seemingly, utterly unconscious of his temerity, with the utmost *naïveté*.

He is less specific than Baudelaire; herein consists another difference between them. Baudelaire’s women are his only; they are real individuals, most of them lamentably ill-favoured and unsavoury. Verlaine, on the contrary, is enamoured of *la femme*—of generalizations. In his quality of poet, he wishes to cover everything. He is less subtly analytic than Baudelaire; he says he is affected in a certain way by a certain thing; the reader must divine the sequence of cause and effect, by examining the object and the result. He gives the what and why; the reader must evolve the how. This makes him seem almost more unearthly than Baudelaire, since he does not explain his transcendental processes.

So far, then, Verlaine differs from Baudelaire; but these things wherein they differ are not the things most characteristic of the one or the other. The real bond between them is the dominant, though diverse, mood of both; the perversity, namely, which Baudelaire, perhaps, learned from Poe, and which Verlaine may have taken from Baudelaire—this perversity, and the cult of the grotesque, the grotesque of the East. Early in life, as every one knows, Baudelaire went on a long voyage to the East, where he luxuriated among the charms of Brahmin temples, Moslem minarets, and *la femme noir*. Verlaine, so far as I know, has never been out of Europe; but he could easily have fathomed the grotesque, the unusual, by travelling through *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Poèmes Barbares*.

As a corollary to this love of the grotesque, we find a yearning, also common to him and to Baudelaire, for all that is unusual; a struggle intense and bitter to say what words cannot say. This appears best, perhaps, in the second poem in *Les Passages Tristes*—*Les Passages Tristes*, by the way, being dedicated to Catulle Mendès.

“ *Le Souvenir avec le Crépuscule*
Rougeoie et tremble à l’ardent horizon
De l’Espérance enflammée qui recule
Et s’agrandit ainsi qu’une cloison
Mystérieuse ou mainte floraison

—*Dahlia, lys, tulipe et renoncule—
 S'élançait autour d'un treillis et circule
 Parmi la malade exhalaison
 De parfums lourds et chauds, dont le poison
 —Dahlia, lys, tulipe et renoncule—
 Noyant mes sens, mon âme et ma raison,
 Mêle dans une immense pamoison
 Le Souvenir avec le Crépuscule.*”

This certainly seems to say something, and really does say a little; its value, however, its real power, it owes to what it suggests. It does not try to be definite. It is like trying to paint motion or emotion—something which can only be suggested, symbolized.

He is not satisfied with expressing the inexpressible; he also yearns to possess the impossible. In default of this, he dreams of men who have nearly achieved such possession; of men whose impossible dreams have nearly been fulfilled. For Cesare Borgia, for instance, he has intense admiration and sympathetic appreciation. He describes a portrait of him in Rome—beautiful, amorous, with intense ideas—dreams—gleaming through his eyes. And for moderns, also, has he admiration—for such moderns as have been either so before or so behind their age that they seem impossible, palpitating anachronisms. And of all men to Louis II. of Bavaria has his heart, or rather his imagination, most gone forth, as the following sonnet witnesses:

“*A Louis II. de Bavière.
 “Roi, le seul vrai roi de ce siècle, salut, Sire,
 Qui voulûtes mourir vengeant votre raison
 Des choses de la politique, et du délire
 De cette science intruse dans la maison,
 “De cette Science assassin de l’Oraison
 Et du Chant et de l’Art et de toute la Lyre,
 Et simplement et plein d’orgueil en floraison
 Tuâtes en mourant, salut, Roi, bravo, Sire!
 “Vous fûtes un poète, un soldat, le seul Roi
 De ce siècle où les rois se font si peu de chose,
 Et le martyr de la Raison selon la Foi.
 Salut à votre très unique apothéose,
 Et que votre âme ait son fier cortège, or et fer,
 Sur un air magnifique et joyeux de Wagner.”*”

In this manner Verlaine hails those who seek and barely fail of seizing the unattainable—of possessing the impossible.

In one respect, at least, he himself has attained this impossible of his brooding dreams. Saul is among the prophets; Verlaine has become religious. His religion has become part of himself and he takes himself seriously; his religion, therefore, is no plaything, but something to be regarded with bated breath. It may, perhaps, even yield to him and to us a fresh sensation—a new emotion; we should, therefore, regard it as seriously as he does. The man who divides, or who has divided, his worship between Silenus and the Muses, the man who wrote

*"O triste, triste était mon âme
A cause, à cause d'une femme."—*

who also wrote

*"J'ai peur d'un baiser
Comme d'une abeille.
Je souffre et je veille
Sans me reposer,
J'ai peur d'un baiser"—*

this man, who has done all that man can do and some things that most men cannot, takes Victor Hugo to task for irreverence and lack of seriousness. Thus does he blaspheme "Saint Victor":

*"A Victor Hugo
En lui envoyant 'Sagesse.'
"Nul parmi vos flatteurs d'aujourd'hui n'a connu
Mieux que moi la fierté d'admirer votre gloire:
Votre nom m'enivrait comme un nom de victoire,
Votre œuvre, je l'aimais d'un amour ingénu.
Depuis, la Vérité m'a mis le monde à nu.
J'aime Dieu, son Eglise, et ma vie est de croire
Tout ce que vous tenez, hélas! pour dérisoire,
Et j'abhorre en vos vers le Serpent reconnu.
J'ai changé, comme vous. Mais d'une autre manière.
Tout petit que je suis j'avais aussi le droit
D'une évolution, la bonne, la dernière."—*

Verlaine, having been a pessimist, a decadent, has become a Neo-catholic,—a desjardinist with the philanthropy left out. To a skeptic, belief is not possible; in believing, therefore, Verlaine has achieved the impossible by means of a fallacious syllogism. So far he has fulfilled his dream, so far put himself on a level with Cesare Borgia and Ludwig II. The result is remarkable, perhaps; even incongruous, grotesque. But Verlaine is not the man to waste his time in doing ordinary things. He has, also, a love of the incongruous for its own

sake. If, then, he can himself be incongruous, he will only bring himself into accord with his own verse, and thus fulfil Milton's dictum that the life of a poet should in itself be a kind of poem. And, after all, the phase called desjardinism is but the logical outcome of the phase called the decadence, just as the decadence is only the outcome of pessimism. Paris is a fast town, even philosophies and movements having there a something of unwonted rapidity. Accordingly, so soon as men were satisfied that the world was bad, together with all that in it was; so soon, also, as men were satisfied from observation and experience that things were going to destruction as fast as could reasonably be expected; then, realizing these things, considering them as facts, men began to say: "Let us make the most of this evil world. Let us analyze our pleasures, and thus increase them; let us analyze our pain, and have, at least, the satisfaction of analysis." Another reason they may have had to urge them on this new development. When pessimism first became an organized system, it was something of a novelty. The prophets of the new cult had a something of distinction which appealed to their artistic temperaments. Some of them were even howled at and persecuted—all but martyred. But pessimism is perhaps the easiest of all poses for a man to acquire, and the human soul pants for distinction. Therefore, the numbers of the pessimists increased in a geometrical progression. Merely to be a pessimist was no longer to be distinguished. Meanwhile certain choice spirits had learned that merely to say the world was bad was not half so amusing as to analyze its measure of badness, and that, moreover, analysis is its own exceeding great reward. Thereupon, Bourget, Lemaitre and the like began, each in his own way, to analyze his own and other's sensations, soon developing thereby that exquisiteness of perception, that antithesis to philistinism, which people call the decadence. Having, then, discovered a form of enjoyment to which both pleasure and pain contributed, both the senses and the intellect, the enjoyers discovered also that the sufferings of the masses somewhat interfered with their esoteric raptures. Even Mr. Pater, *par excellence* the appreciator, confesses that the pain existent in the world must always form a dark background for æsthetic delight. The decadents, then, to increase their own enjoyment seek to increase the enjoyment of the masses, they also look about them for some assurance that evil is really a good, pain really a benefit. Desjardins sums up this tendency; Verlaine is less of a philanthropist than he, but more of a Catholic—philanthropy and

Catholicism being the foundation stories of the new cult. And people take Verlaine seriously; Desjardins himself does so, referring to *Sagesse* as showing the deep Catholicism of the world, and as being an edifying devotional work.

In America, it may be, we do not as yet sympathize with desjardinism. Pessimism we have just grown tired of, and the decadence has barely come to us in the train of Mr. Wilde's Intentions. Pessimism for a long time we refused to take seriously; when it began to bore us, we had to recognize its importance. And since the decadence has not yet had time to weary us, since it is still englamoured in impossible potentialities, we can still play with it, still treat it with joyous levity. When it, in turn, has grown wearisome, then we may welcome desjardinism with open arms; then, it may be, we shall learn *Sagesse* by heart. With desjardinism, perhaps, the century will end its folly; an hour or so of penitence and vigil before the dawn of the new century's great Perhaps.

At present, however, *Sagesse* strikes some of us, at least, as being play-poetry — adroit enough, but adroit posing, at the best. Verlaine, to these people, may seem only a man who has the gift of verse, and who plays therewith, huge jokes on the world, and on himself as a part of it. He can, however, be terribly sincere — horribly direct; this in poems probably written in the morning, quite by accident, and contrary to his ordinary habits. Take the following, for example, from *Sagesse*:

*"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est là,
Simple et tranquille.
Cette paisible rumeur là
Vient de la ville.*

*"Qu'as-tu fait, ô toi que voilà
Pleurant sans cesse,
Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà.
De ta jeunesse?"*

Verlaine does not write very long poems, therefore he is hardly ever tiresome. He is eminently perverse, eternally throwing unexpected, incongruous things together, so that he constantly surprises, and rarely bores. His unconscious humour tickles us, his moralizings make us smile. With these qualities, I fear, he can never be considered a great poet; intentionally or not, he is far too amusing for that.

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